

Barbara Kopple interview Making *Harlan County, USA*

by Chuck Kleinhans

from *Jump Cut*, no. 14, 1977, pp. 4-6

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I first saw HARLAN COUNTY, USA, in October at the Toronto film festival, a few days after it premiered at the New York festival. The next day I met the filmmaker for an interview. Barbara Kopple impressed me as a vibrant, frank, hardworking, and tough-minded person, and I immediately liked her as much as I liked the film.

We began by talking about her background. She began filmmaking by making a film instead of writing a term paper for a clinical psychology course in college. The experience hooked her on filmmaking, and later she went to New York and worked with the Maysles on SALESMAN and many of their other films. Her political commitment had begun in college with participation in the antiwar movement, and finally she wanted to make her own films to express her own convictions.

In 1972 she began filming the Miners for Democracy movement led by Arnold Miller. When the Boyle machine was ousted from the union leadership, the union began to move on organizing the unorganized, and miners in Harlan County responded. The strike for union recognition began, and Kopple moved to Harlan to cover it for the next year.

Kleinhans: When you were filming it, what use did you see for the film?

Kopple: I was very lucky. Because I had a camera in my hand, I could talk to the union leadership, the coal operators, the gun thugs, the UMW organizers and the rank and file. It was an incredible influx of information. And then I could communicate and relate that to the people in different courses of the struggle. I wanted to let the struggle emerge and try very hard not to manipulate it. Of course, when you make films they get manipulated, because it comes from a certain point of view. But I also saw the film and see the film now as a great organizing tool. I think that films in themselves never change people, but films are really good bases to have discussions around and to take things to a higher

level. There's a lot of uses for the film, particularly in the coal fields and in other trade unions. It's a film that the general public should be able to look at too.

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Kleinhans: It must have been a temptation with the immediacy of the issues just to stop and say, "Well, I'll make a short film," or "I'll stop because I have this great footage and the issues are there." Yet you went on and showed the whole length of the strike and its aftermath.

Kopple: It wasn't only thinking what kind of things should be in it. It was also feeling that I was engaged in a struggle, and that even if I didn't have any film in the camera, it was important for me to be there because having a camera there kept down violence. Also, the people there really needed to know that there were other people that cared about them and supported them. It was a part of my life. I was there, and I lived there for a long time, and I lived with them, and I wanted to stay.

Kleinhans: Where were you coming from politically when you started to make the film? Did the process of making the film change you? What did you learn?

Kopple: I guess it changed me tremendously. When I went in there a lot of the people were really backward. I was able to watch change happen: people starting their own newspapers, people starting to study and read politically. We'd all read together and have little study sessions, things like that. It made me learn that you can't do anything by yourself. In order to achieve something or in order to win some kind of victory, you all have to be united under the same ideas or the same cause. It taught me a lot about criticism and self-criticism—that it wasn't on a personal level, that it was on a political level that depended on the survival of everybody. It also taught me what it meant to be in a life or death situation where nobody was going to help me. The only power you had came from that community, and if that community went against you, you were dead. And those are some very powerful lessons.

Kleinhans: Did you choose people to film who you felt were politically strong to begin with?

Kopple: The main thing that I had to deal with was being there at the right time because lots of different things were going on and really letting the people emerge. Different people came out at different times and became very strong, like the woman with the long black hair, for instance. When the women were having a low morale fight, she sort of cinched it all up by saying, "I'm not fighting for men, I'm fighting for a contract." And the very old woman who said "I've been through all this in the 30s; they may shoot me. But they're not going to shoot the union out of me." Different people emerged, particularly the women, because

the men were served court injunctions. There's no way that you're gonna win a strike having three people in the picket line. It's just not gonna happen. So the women had to come out. All of these women had a long tradition of unionism. That's all they heard from the time that they were kids. It was also the first time that these women were able to actively do anything in their lives and feel their own power and really come alive. There was no way of stopping them. And they were much stronger than the men. I filmed everything that you could possibly film to try to bring more of the men's role, but the men in Appalachia are very low key. The women are very tough and very strong, particularly during the strike.

Kleinhans: I was surprised, but also I was very intrigued, by the scene where one woman is accused of being a troublemaker, of being lazy, and then she responds by saying that another woman is a marriage breaker. Why did you decide to leave that in?

Kopple: I feel that a lot of films that show struggle just show people moving straight forward. But strikes have their ups and strikes have their downs. To be really together and to show a film that's really gonna work with other people and their struggles, you have to show the low periods as well as the high periods. But you also have to show them getting back together again. And I think that that's what that scene ended with. It's very important because in any kind of political work that we do, you bicker with each other, you have periods of deep depression and you take it out on each other. The thing is to go through that—it's a criticism; it's a criticism of the working class, which is very healthy I think. And I like that scene a lot.

Kleinhans: Another thing I like about the film is the portrayal of Miller, and particularly that moment when someone starts to argue with him and he says, "Let's step outside." It's a perfect portrayal of his role. But how do you analyze him? Do you think it's the man or the institution?

Kopple: Doing that last section of the film was difficult because during the editing of that there was a split between the union's vice-president and the president. There was a lot worse that could have been said about Miller and his collusion with the coal operators. I was real nervous about doing it because I felt that I had a political responsibility, and that if this film ever reinforced the right, the vice-president, that I would be very upset by it. So it took a lot of thinking, a lot of figuring, a lot of discussions to try to figure out how to handle that section of the film. It was handled very lightly with the footage that I had.

I had very definite personal feelings about Miller, but it was just a real struggle in dealing with that section of the film, and dealing with it in a way that people—miners and other people—would understand more who their enemies were, and where the power really had to come from. I had to do it without coming out and showing it in such a way that might endorse something that's worse. That was really one of the main

political decisions of the film—not to do that.

Kleinhans: I thought that one of the side benefits of the film—obviously not the main intention—was how powerfully it spoke to radicals about the power of working class people. The film did not romanticize the workers. Yet it showed the incredible strength that they had, and the fact that their strength in many ways comes out of the fact that they don't have a choice about fighting. They really have to fight for everything that they want. A lot of times I get the sense that people with a middle class background find it all too easy to either romanticize or to criticize without understanding the contradictions involved or the source of working people's strength. There's a young man who says that the miners have to keep struggling, and that when they had the big march, people should have gone out to the mine itself.

Kopple: And expropriated the machine gun and the mine itself. He was also saying there's two types of ways to run strikes, and that you've got to move right on to the next struggle.

Kleinhans: Is that your own feeling? I mean, is that the message that you're trying to underline in the film? That's the sense that I get. I didn't know if that was your sense.

Kopple: I agree with him. I think that he made a really good analysis of what was happening. It was really terrific that thousands of miners came in, but they didn't deal with the real issues. When they were gone, the people there were still left alone having to struggle. I agree with that. I think if you don't keep on fighting and you, you might lose everything that you've gained. So you've got to pull it forward. You've got to take it forward. I agree with him.

Kleinhans: I was impressed by one thing. The whole business with Boyle was stated in a very clear and unexaggerated way. You could easily have spent an awful lot of time on Boyle and really made the whole thing melodramatic between the good guys and the bad guys, and you chose not to. It showed an awful lot of restraint. I think the issue's so dramatic especially since in the media it was so clear that Boyle was such a rat. He looks like a rat.

Kopple: I think hissing the villain sometimes gets you away from the points that you really want to deal with. And if you give somebody long enough, they hang themselves eventually.

Kleinhans: Another thing that was understated was the situation of the mother and the wife of the man who was shot. You had the footage of the funeral and you had the interview with them. It's very difficult. Either it becomes terribly maudlin and sentimental—and I didn't get that sense at all—or else it becomes almost careless or just tossed aside. It seemed just right. Did you have to work a lot to get that in the editing?

There was a real sense that the camera wasn't intrusive, as it is so much with television documentary.

Kopple: They really wanted us to be there. They were kept at the hospital for three days, and he was kept alive by machines. He was dead; you lose part of your brain, and you're not there anymore. It was a tremendous period of suffering for them. And they were very strong people, the mother in particular. She broke down at the funeral, but in the hospital while she was waiting to hear the news she just said,

“That’s what my son was shot over ... he was shot for the union, and I don't want my kids ever to be a yellow backed scab. I want them to be a union man.”

And then she told stories about her own life growing up. They were just very strong people. That miner’s death also was the only reason that the union and the government and the coal operators got together. Because otherwise there would have been civil war. Those people were arming themselves and getting ready to go out that night and just kill anybody that they saw that was not for the union.

Kleinhans: How did you feel about the issue of violence?

Kopple: I feel that ... yeah, you have to change your tactics. If someone’s shooting at you, you've gotta shoot back. And I was glad when that happened. That was a tactical change that came from the workers themselves. I'm sure glad there were guns there. That might sound strong to people in other areas, but in this area ...

Kleinhans: I don't think anyone who sees the film could think that.

Kopple: Even now I've been hearing this whole liberal thing of “ban the gun.” I don't think they should ban the gun. It’s very important to have ourselves armed.

Kleinhans: When the thugs came down and attacked the camera ... what happened?

Kopple: Oh, It was just an incredible scene. We'd all gotten together by a supermarket at about 4:30 in the morning. Suddenly we see a scab caravan go by. So like idiots, all of us—the rest of the people hadn't come—get in our cars and go up to the picket line. The scab caravan stopped at the gas station, where they always stopped. It was pitch black out, and suddenly we hear this gunfire—semi-automatic carbines. We don't know where it’s coming from; it’s sort of like lighting up the sky. Then as the gun thugs started to come up, it stops, so it had to be from across where the company was. Then the scabs went through, came back, got me first, got the camera and then beat the shit out of people. Basil, the head gun thug, put a gun into one of the black miners’, Bill Worthington’s, belly,

pushed him into the bushes. People were getting beaten with pipes and things. But it was very dark, so in the film, you can't see much but Basil walking around with his gun. They sufficiently scared and intimidated people and then went right back across the bridge. It was a very scary scene. I wasn't scared when it was happening because I was so angry. They pushed me up against the rocks, and I just started swinging to keep them off of me. They took each one of us individually and did that to us. The cameraman, Hart Perry, was yelling, "The camera's broken, the camera's broken," and that's all they really wanted to do was to make sure that we weren't functioning.

Kleinhans: How did you finance the film?

Kopple: I used to write letters for money from miners' homes; I'd be sitting there with maybe five dollars in my pocket. I used to race back to New York City, show little pieces of it to different groups. I'd try to find places that would let me Xerox hundreds of grant proposals and I'd spend days collating them and writing them out and writing zillions of fundraising letters. I learned so much about fundraising from foundations that I could write a book about it. It was a tremendously painful experience to have to keep dealing with it because I couldn't relate to it. I'd be in Harlan and I'd have to come home and try to figure out how to do a fundraising pitch and how to talk to these people, and it was very hard. People supported it, but I sometimes had to bleed to get anything. I just had to give so much and go so far out just to get anything to keep going.

Kleinhans: Did you have any choice in that? You had no other way of financing it?

Kopple: No other way. I went to a few producers who'd say, "Why is a little girl like you doing a film like this?" Foundations were the only way. It was just weird because it's the excess of capitalism that's supporting this film, and they're supposed to be doing humanitarian, kind of educational things. So I had to do research on all the different foundations to see what they'd funded in the past, show them stuff that would just really try to knock them out, and then try to talk about it. I didn't enjoy it. I met a lot of really good people out of it, and a lot of good people came forward to support it. But it's so difficult for independent filmmakers or people who are making films about social issues to get funded. It's a really negative system because they get you to compete against all your peers. Maybe there's ten people that are gonna get grants and 100 people have proposals. Right? I mean, it's a lousy deal.

Plus they never give you what you ask for. You ask for \$1000 and they give you \$1. So they make you do it 999 times more. They think it's healthy for you.

Kleinhans: Well, now you face the other end of it—distribution,

Kopple: I don't even know what questions to ask. It's something that I'm not going to rush into. The things that I have to have in a contract are: that the film will not be recut; that the film will be able to be used by workers for free or the cost of the mailing or whatever they can afford; that it can be used for political benefits—things like that. And also I want to pay off my debts, and I want to have enough money to begin another film. I don't think that's asking for a lot. The film cost over \$200,000 to make and it took four years. But from the way people talk, you're lucky if you get a couple of thousand dollars just to keep going. And I'm torn because want it to be distributed on a really wide level so that a lot of people can see it. But I also have to deal with the realities of what I'm capable of doing and what I'm not capable of doing. And I'm not capable of having all of these debts over me. There's no way in the world I can ever pay those off. And I just don't know if foundations are going to continue to fund the films that I want to do. So I've got to have something just to be able to begin, to get a little footage so that I can start the same routine over again of, you know, raising money to do another film.

Kleinhans: What do you want to do? What's your next film?

Kopple: I want to do a film on the black belt in the South and the struggle for unionization, particularl, at a J.P. Stevens textile mill that's been struggling to be part of the union now for 15 years. it will show the movement of industry north to south, and be an investigation into what the civil rights movement was all about too. It's another big one; it might take another three years, but I really want to do it. I've got a lot of research to do and a lot of thinking to do...

Kleinhans: It will be worth waiting for.

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HARLAN COUNTY, USA is now being distributed by Cinema 5, 595 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10022.

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